

# Tonpa Shenrab Miwoche



*Tonpa Shenrab*

**Tonpa Shenrab** (Wylie: *ston pa gshen rab* “Teacher gShenrab”) or **Shenrab Miwo** (Wylie: *gshen rab mi bo*)—also called the Buddha Shenrab, Guru Shenrab and a number of other titles—is the founder of the Bon tradition of Tibet.

[Shenrab Miwo] occupies a position very similar to that of Śākyamuni in Buddhism, but... we have no available [or pre-10th century] sources with which to establish his historicity, his dates, his racial origin, his activities, and the authenticity of the enormous number of books either attributed directly to him or believed to be his word.”<sup>[1]</sup>

The story of Tonpa Shenrab was revealed in a fourteenth century *terma* of Loden Nyingpo.<sup>[2]</sup>



*Tonpa Shenrab life story, 19th-century painting, Rubin Museum of Art*

## 1 Etymology

The name *Shenrab Miwo* is in the Zhang-Zhung language, which is a relative of Old Tibetan; while many suggestions have been put forward as to its meaning, it appears to be the Zhangzhung word “bodhisattva” (equivalent to Tibetan *shégya sempa*, Wylie: *shes rgya sems dpa'*).<sup>[3]</sup>

## 2 Shenrab’s life according to Bon traditions

According to Bon *terma*, Tonpa Shenrab predates Gautama Buddha. It is held that Tonpa Shenrab first studied the Bon doctrine in Tagzig Olmo Lung Ring, at the end of which he pledged to Shenlha Okar, the god of compassion, that he would guide the peoples of this world





*Tonpa Shenrab life story, 19th-century painting, Rubin Museum of Art*



*Olmo Lung Ring, homeland of Tonpa Shenrab Miwo, 19th-century painting, Rubin Museum of Art*

to liberation.

Like Gautama, Tönpa Shenrab was of royal birth. Tonpa Shenrab renounced his royal inheritance at the age of thirty-one to travel the path to enlightenment. Tonpa Shenrab embraced the life of a renunciate and commenced austerities, spreading the doctrine of Bon; at length, he arrived in the land of Zhangzhung near what is widely held to be Mount Kailash.

Accounts of Tonpa Shenrab's life are to be found in three principal sources, the *Dodü* (Wylie: *mdo 'dus*), *Zermik* (Wylie: *gzer mig*), and *Ziji* (Wylie: *gzi brjid*). The first and second of the accounts are held to be *terma* discovered by *tertön* in the 10th or 11th century; the third is part of the oral lineage (Wylie: *snyan brgyud*) transmitted from teacher to disciple.

### 3 The Four Portals and the Fifth, the Treasury

The doctrines taught by Tönpa Shenrab are generally classified variously, two being most common. In the first, **The Four Portals and the Fifth, the Treasury** (*sgo bzhi md-zod lnga*), the:

- **White Water** (*chab dkar*) relates esoteric matters;
- **Black Water** (*chab nag*) concerns narratives, magic, funeral rites and ransom rituals;
- **Land of Phan** (*'phan yul*) codifies monastic rules and philosophical expositions;
- **Divine Guide** (*dpon gsas*) enshrines the Dzogchen teachings; and finally
- **Treasury** (*mtho thog*) which serves as an anthology of the salient items of the Four Portals.

### 4 The Nine Ways of Bon

The second classification, the **Nine Ways of Bon** (*bon theg pa rim dgu*) is as follows—the:

- **Way of Prediction** (*phyva gshen theg pa*) codifies ritual, prognostication, sortilege and astrology;
- **Way of the Visual World** (*snang shen theg pa*) details the psychophysical Universe;
- **Way of Illusion** (*'phrul gshen theg pa*) explains the rites for the dispersal of adverse *tulpas*, entities and energies;
- **Way of Existence** (*srid gshen theg pa*) details funeral and death rituals;

- **Way of a Lay Follower** (*dge bsnyen theg pa*) contains the ten principles for wholesome activity;
- **Way of a Monk** (*drang srong theg pa*) codifies monastic rules and regulations;
- **Way of Primordial Sound** (*a dkar theg pa*) charts the integration of an exalted practitioner into the mandala of highest enlightenment;
- **Way of Primordial Shen**, (*ye gshen theg pa*) renders the guidelines for seeking a true tantric master and the commitments (*dam tshigs*, parallel to the Sanskrit *samaya*) that bind a disciple to his tantric master; and finally,
- **Way of Supreme Natural Condition** (*bla med theg pa*), or The Way of **Dzogchen**.

The nine ways can also be classified into three groups, the:

- **Causal Ways** (*rgyu'i theg pa*) comprises the first four of the above;
- **Resultant Ways** (*'bras bu'i theg pa*) includes the fifth through eighth; and
- **Unsurpassable Way** or the **Way of Dzogchen** (*khyad par chen po'i theg pa* or *rdzogs pa chen po*, abbreviated *rdzogs chen*) is the ninth.

## 5 The Bon Canon

The Bon canon comprises more than two hundred volumes, classified in four categories: the **Sutras** (*mdo*), the **Perfection of Wisdom Teachings** (*'bum*), the **Tantras** (*rgyud*) and **Knowledge** (*mdzod*). Besides these, the Bon canon includes material on rituals, arts and crafts, logic, medicine, poetry and narrative. It is interesting to note that the “Knowledge” section concerning cosmogony and cosmology, though in some respects unique to Bon, shares a more than passing resemblance to Nyingma (*rnying ma*) doctrines.

## 6 Aspects of Shenrab Miwoche

Shenrab Miwoche is said to have **three aspects or forms**: the **tulku** (Wylie: *sprul sku*) or **nirṃaṇakāya**, Shenrab Miwoche; the **dzokku** (Wylie: *rdzogs sku*) or **sambhogakāya**, Shenlha Okar and the **bönku** (Wylie: *bon sku*) or **dharmakāya**, Taphritsa.<sup>[4]</sup>

## 7 Footnotes

- [1] Karmey, Samten G. (1975). *A General Introduction to the History and Doctrines of Bon*, pp. 175-176. Memoirs of

the Research Department of the Toyo Bunko, No. 33. Tokyo.

- [2] Schaik, Sam van. *Tibet: A History*. Yale University Press 2011, page 99-100.
- [3] Hummel, Sigbert (1992). “gShen”. *Bulletin of Tibetology* (Gangtok, Sikkim, India: Namgyal Institute of Tibetology) **28** (3): 5–8.
- [4] The Tibetan for *dharmakaya* is *chos sku* in the Buddhist context; though a case can be made that Bon borrowed some, or even much, of its current terminology from Buddhism, to suggest that Sanskrit words are thus the “source” of this terminology is dubious.

## 8 References

- Bellezza, John Vincent. (2010). “gShen-rab Myibo, His life and times according to Tibet’s earliest literary sources.” *Revue d’Etudes Tibétaines* Number 19 October 2010, pp. 31–118.
- Unknown Author (2005). *The Bonpo’s Tradition*. (Accessed: January 17, 2007).

## 9 External links

- **61 episodes in the life of gShen-rabs mi-bo**
- [Art and Culture of Yungdrung Bon, CDrom depicting 10 tankas paintings which belongs to Musée Guimet (Paris) (19th century) on the 533 interactive sketches of the life of Tonpas Shenrab, founder of the Bon tradition, from His birth to His enlightenment. They describe the unknown mythical epic tale of the Universal Instructor.

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